ABOUT MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

• In MS, the immune system attacks the myelin sheath, the fatty tissue that surrounds and protects nerve fibers, as well as the nerve fibers themselves. Damage from these attacks is called demyelination. When any part of the myelin sheath or nerve fiber is damaged or destroyed, nerve impulses traveling to and from the brain and spinal cord are distorted and interrupted, causing a wide variety of symptoms.

• Sometimes the myelin can repair itself and the MS symptoms go away after the immune attack. Over time, however, the myelin and underlying nerve fibers cannot recover and suffer permanent damage. The cause of MS is currently unknown.

• Symptoms vary depending on the location of the lesions in the brain and spinal cord. They may include tingling, numbness, painful sensations, slurred speech, and blurred or double vision. Some people experience muscle weakness, poor balance, poor coordination, muscle tightness or spasticity, tremors, or temporary or permanent paralysis. Problems with bladder, bowel, sexual function, or mood are also very common.

• Fatigue is a major concern for most people with MS, as are challenges with memory, attention, and concentration. Symptoms may come and go, appear in any combination, and be mild, moderate, or severe.

• Many symptoms—such as fatigue, insomnia, mood, cognition, mobility, spasticity, and bowel function—are very responsive to self-care lifestyle changes such as increased activity. In addition, medication therapies and other interventions are available to help manage MS symptoms.

VA RESEARCH ON MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS: OVERVIEW

• Medical care for Veterans with MS, whether or not their illness was service-connected, can include disease-modifying therapies, other medications, physical and occupational therapy, and other health care services and medical equipment.

• Current VA research includes investigations into the biology of MS; targets for intervention; impacts of spasticity; fatigue and fall management programs; health services and the care delivery to evaluate and improve mood and fatigue; and telehealth interventions to improve access to care and symptom management, among others.

• VA’s Multiple Sclerosis Centers of Excellence (MSCoE) are dedicated to furthering the understanding of MS and its impact on Veterans and developing effective treatments to help manage the disease and its symptoms. MSCoE-East is located in Baltimore, and MSCoE-West is jointly located in Seattle and Portland, Oregon.

• VA has also established a national integrated network of dedicated MS health care professionals for care and referrals within the VA health care system.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

2003 – Founded the Multiple Sclerosis Centers of Excellence

2014 - Determined that military deployment to the first Gulf War was not a risk factor for developing MS

2017 - Found that high dosages of lipoic acid can significantly slow brain atrophy, reduce falls, and improve walking times in some MS patients
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